

Around the River Bend

by Sherry Garland

This story is set in 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War. The war took place far away in Southeast Asia. At the time, the United States was helping South Vietnam fight against North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese were Communists. The United States was against Communism. Many Americans, and many more Vietnamese, died during this war.

As this story begins, the main character is still dealing with the loss of her older brother, who had been killed a year before in Vietnam. She is camping with her parents along the banks of the Brazos River in Texas. During the night, she hears sounds of helicopters from a nearby army camp. Soldiers from the U.S. and South Vietnam are training at the camp. Those sounds make her think of Vietnam—and the war that claimed her brother.

As you listen to this story, see if you can understand how the main character is feeling. See if you can understand *why* and *how* her feelings may have changed by the end of the story.

The helicopters would not let me sleep. At first I only heard a distant hum, no louder than the buzz of a hornet. Then, one by one, the silhouettes appeared over the top of the cedar-covered mountains. They moved across the face of the moon in formation like fat dragonflies with blinking red eyes. The hum turned into loud chop-chop-chops that echoed throughout the river canyon where we camped. The choppers performed maneuvers, following the leader like squatty black geese on a southward migration.

Chill-bumps rose on my neck at the sight of the flying machines. I knew that American soldiers from nearby Camp Wolters rode inside them, training for

combat. The terrain in this part of Texas, steep hills thick with trees and shrubs, was similar to Vietnam. *Vietnam*—the very word nauseated me. How many of those men in the choppers would never come back? I wondered. How many of them would end up like my brother, Larry?

I tried not to think of the last time I had seen Larry. A red-white-and-blue flag covered his closed casket. It was all the family had to look at during the chaplain's eulogy, during the hollow bugle notes playing taps, and the seven rifles firing three short bursts in salute. And not seeing Larry for a final farewell made it so much worse.

I got up from my bedroll and walked beside the river. It had been a year since

Larry's funeral and I thought I had put it out of my mind in the excitement of getting ready for school to start. But now the whirl of blades reminded me of the war on the other side of the world. My heart grew sick, thinking of the waste of so many lives. And for what? For some country that I had never heard of? Who cared what happened to them?

By the time I returned to the dew-soaked bedroll, it was midnight. Hour after hour the helicopter formations crept over the mountains. It was four o'clock and even the croaking frogs and crickets and my yapping dog, Frisky, had quieted when the maneuvers stopped.

The sun was high when I awoke. By the river, my father merrily skinned and gutted freshly caught fish. From under a live oak tree, I heard the familiar sound of crunching ice and saw my mother cranking homemade ice cream. Vanilla with peaches—Larry's favorite.

This September camping trip was an end-of-summer ritual in our family. But it just didn't feel right doing things like this without Larry. Didn't all this dredge up painful memories for my parents? I know it did for me.

"I can't believe you're making Larry's favorite ice cream," I said. My voice was as chilly as the September night had been. "It's like you and Daddy are trying to forget Larry. You're pretending he never existed."

"Honey, I know you miss him," she said softly. "Your father and I do too. But you can't stop living."

I grabbed my fishing rod and announced: "I'm going up the river." As I stomped along the narrow trail surrounded by wild flowers, weeds, and willow trees, a rabbit jumped from a patch of

purple thistles. Our dog Frisky charged after it and disappeared. A few moments later I heard her frantic yapping.

"Frisky!" I shouted, then whistled and slapped my thigh, hoping it wasn't a skunk. Or a rattlesnake. *You never know what's around the river bend*, Larry used to always say with an optimistic smile. He even said it the night he packed his suitcase for boot camp. "You never know what's around the river bend, kid," he had said to me. And that was the last time I saw him.

As I rounded the bend, I saw an older couple strolling along the shore. I also saw a kid fishing much further out in a rowboat. But Frisky was on the shore, her ears at attention. She was barking at a man standing in the river. His U.S. Army fatigues were rolled up to his knees. His boots, olive drab shirt, and cap were piled at the edge of the river. He gracefully cast out a fishing net over the water. His close-cropped raven-black hair glistened in the sunlight.

I tiptoed toward the riverbank with the intention of grabbing Frisky and running. But I slipped on a muddy spot and fell. The soldier turned around. He smiled a friendly smile and laughed.

"You OK?" he asked. As he walked toward me, his bare feet getting coated with sand, I saw that his features were Asian. I had never met an Asian before. I felt my face turn red as he helped me up.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I said. I was more embarrassed than anything.

"What are you doing?" He spoke choppy English with an unfamiliar accent.

"Fishing," I muttered and brushed sand off my shorts.

"Me, too," he said, his dark eyes twinkling. "I love fishing. Back in my village,

Ong-noi and me fish every day on Song Tranh River."

I glanced at the ground. "I don't see your fishing pole."

"I use net. Big, big fish in river over there." He pointed to a dark green area of the river and held his hands three feet apart. "I come every weekend to catch big fish, but he get away."

"You need a fishing pole and bait," I said, relaxing a little. "Is it a yellow catfish?"

He crinkled his eyebrows into a question. "Cat-fish?"

With a stick I drew a fish in the sand, giving it long whiskers.

The soldier grinned. "That him. Big guy."

"My brother and father have been trying to catch Ol' Yeller for years. He must be thirty pounds. Keeps getting bigger and bigger. Show me where you saw him."

I picked up my fishing rod and followed the soldier out to a sandbar. The water gently sloshed around my ankles, then my knees, then touched the tips of my cutoffs before we crawled up onto the white island.

"There." He pointed to a greenish spot, then unfurled the net. It gracefully sailed through the air, plopped over the water and sank. He began drawing in the cord and hauling it back in. After he hoisted it on to the sandbar and emptied it, minnows, small perch, and crawdads leaped and squirmed. But no catfish. He tossed the catch back into the river, but not before I selected a lively minnow. I secured it on my hook, then cast out. The line whistled as it unreeled and the sinker smacked the water with a loud plop. I gently began reeling in.

"You good fisherman. Who teach you?" the guy asked me.

"Mostly my brother, Larry. He loved fishing more than anything in the world. He would have lived on the river, if he could."

The soldier nodded. "My village on river. Beautiful river."

"Who taught you to fish?"

"Ong-noi—my grandfather. He best fisherman in village. He skinny like a stick with white beard, but he strong. He say: 'To catch fish you must think like fish. When fish smell food, he get careless.'" The soldier heaved a sigh. "I want to be fisherman, too, like my grandfather and my father."

"I've never heard of fishing with a net," I said. "Where are you from?"

"Vietnam," he said proudly. "I am Trung Tran." He extended his hand. My heart jumped and a chill swept over my body.

"You're Vietnamese?" I said, recoiling from the hand. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in the jungles fighting your stinking war?" My voice dripped ice, but I didn't care. I began reeling in the line as fast as I could.

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I saw the look of confusion cross his face as his smile faded. I knew I was being rude, but I had to get away.

"I go back soon," he said softly. "I come to America to train in helicopter. I become pilot so I can fight North Vietnamese."

His dark eyes sadly watched my jerky movements. With a set jaw I fought with the tangled fishing line. When Trung reached over to help free it, I pushed his hand away.

"I can do it myself," I hissed.

He watched in silence as I grew impa-

tient and snapped the line in two with one vicious jerk. I heard him sigh.

"You no like Vietnamese," he stated calmly.

I didn't even want to look at his face again, but something inside me erupted before I could stop it.

"Vietnam ruined my family. If it weren't for you and your stupid war my brother would still be alive. He'd be right here fishing with me and you'd be back in your stupid village fishing with your stupid nets. I hate Vietnam! I hate it!"

He swallowed hard and his face clouded.

"I sorry for your brother. He very brave. All American brave. They come two years ago and help my village build wall to keep out the North Vietnamese. Americans play with kids. They laugh. I like Americans. My mother cook fish for soldier name Joe Bailey."

"When North Vietnamese discover that our village helped Americans, they come and kill our leaders. They kill my father and my old grandfather, my big brother and two cousin. They kill my mother for feeding fish to Joe Bailey. They burn our huts and take over our village, so I run away. I come to America to learn to fly chopper so I can help my country. I don't want America to fight our war, but I say thank you to all brave American who die."

I looked at his trembling chin and the water glistening on his dark irises. For a moment I didn't think he would be able to speak again, but he did.

"Sometime I say to myself, 'Why America send so many brave soldier to help little Vietnam? Must be that America love Vietnam like me.' Then I come to America and people look at me and say, 'Go home, we hate you! We hate stinky

Vietnamese! What they mean—stinky?"

I saw the look of confusion, anger, and pain his face as he waited for my answer. I drew in a deep breath.

"It's not you they hate. It's the war." I paused. "I'm sorry about your family. I really am."

"I hate war too. But I love Vietnam. I always love Vietnam."

As Trung rolled up the fishing net we heard a loud splash. I saw the gray shape of a fish just beneath the green surface.

"Look! It's Ol' Yeller!" I whispered.

Trung reached into a little paper bag and tossed out a live cricket. The fish circled, then snapped, causing bubbles to dance on the surface. I knelt close to the water. The elusive monster fish was easily three feet long. How I wished I had not jerked my fishing line in two. I saw Trung unrolling his net.

"You'll never catch him with a net," I said.

"Who say?" Trung winked. He waited, like a cat over a goldfish bowl. Soon the fish disappeared.

"He's getting away!" I yelled. "Don't just stand there."

"I study his move. Think like fish." Trung tapped his forehead and tossed out another cricket.

A minute later the fish returned, gliding under the surface, snapping at the insect. Swift as a pouncing cat, Trung flung the net out a few feet away from the fish. As the net sank, he wiggled his hand in the water. The frightened catfish darted away from the hand toward the net. Trung waited, then jerked the cord with all his might. I grabbed one end of the net and together, grunting and struggling, we hauled the twisting, flapping fish onto the sandbar.

I stood up, my mouth open as I stared at the sleek gray body. It was scarred from years of fish hooks and close calls. The glassy eyes gleamed as it rolled on its back to reveal a yellow underbelly.

"Ol' Yeller. I don't believe it." I said. "I just don't believe it. What are you going to do with him?"

"He make plenty fish soup," Trung said, laughing. He stroked the soft underbelly and spoke to the fish as if it were a pet, carefully avoiding the poisonous whiskers and deadly sharp fins. I looked at the angry yellow eyes and the gills fighting desperately to breathe. A sinking feeling filled my heart and suddenly I wanted to cry again.

Trung looked up into my face and his grin faded.

"Ah, this fish too little for me," he said. With a grunt he shoved the fish back into the river. Ol' Yeller floated a second, then got his second wind and disappeared into the murky water.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

Trung shrugged. "He not my fish. He your brother's fish. I have my own fish back in Song Tranh River. I go back and catch him someday." He glanced at the sun high above our heads.

"I go now. My friend need motorcycle for Big Date tonight." He sighed as he rolled up the net. "Someday when war over, maybe I have Big Date, too."

Trung slipped into his boots and shirt, then tugged his cap down low over his forehead.

"Goodbye, American girl," he said, extending his hand once again.

This time I shook it.

"Goodbye, Trung. Good luck."

I watched him climb onto an old

motorcycle. He waved as it wheeled over the bank, spraying sand behind it.

I grabbed my fishing rod, woke Frisky from her snooze in the shade of a wild plum tree, and hurried back to the campsite. My parents sat on an old quilt, finishing up fried catfish and hushpuppies.

"Told you she'd be back in time for the peach ice cream," my father commented without missing a bite.

"So you did," my mother said. She rose and lifted the canister lid. Blobs of creamy white and yellow ice cream clung to the paddle.

"Want to lick the paddle?" she asked. "I remember how you and Larry used to—" She paused.

"—used to fight over the paddle?" I finished the sentence for her. I took the dripping utensil and tasted the sweet, creamy dessert. A million memories of Larry flooded my head and my heart.

"Yeah, I remember." I smiled and it felt good.